Inquiry on Dr. King Death Finds No Plot or U.S. Role

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WASHINGTON, March 23—The Justice Department's civil rights division, after a four-month study of Federal records relating to the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has found no evidence of government complicity or of a tangible conspiracy in the black leader's death, according to department sources.

But Assistant Attorney General J. Stanley Pottinger, who headed the review of files compiled at the time of Dr. King's death in 1968, is nevertheless expected by some Justice officials to recommend a new inquiry into the assassination in hopes of resolving persistent questions about the motives and activities of James Earl Ray, the convicted assassin.

One source noted that Mr. Pottinger's report on the matter, described as "quite lengthly," would not be sent to Attorney General Edward H. Levi until late this week or early next and that a recommendation to begin a full-scale field investigation of the Memphis assassination had not yet been committed to paper.

But the source said that a new investigation would be "the most credible way to handle" the renewed public concern that resulted from disclosures last November by the Senate Intelligence Committee of a secret six-year effort by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to harass and discredit Dr. King.

Those disclosures prompted Mr. Levi to ask the civil rights division to review both the F.B.I.'s covert attempt to disrupt Dr. King's civil rights campaign and the volumes of evidence gathered by the bureau in its search for Mr. Ray, who was sentenced to 99 years in jail after confessing his guilt as Dr. King's murderer.

There was initial concern among past and present Justice lawyers familiar with the King case that the F.B.I. might have contributed directly of inadvertently to Dr. King's death or might have failed to warn him of a plot against his life.

Although the civil rights lawyers reportedly have found no ihnt that the F.B.I. played a role in Dr. King's death, or that Mr. Ray was only a part of a larger assassination conspiracy, they apparently have concluded that a new new F.B.I. investigation of the murder would prove or disprove, once and for all, Mr. Ray's allegations.

Mr. Ray is now seeking a new trial, and his case is before the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in Cincinnati. If his appeal is granted, his lawyers say, he will attempt to show only that he was coerced into admitting his guilt and will not help identify the "real" assassin.

Mr. Ray admits to having been in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the day that Dr. King was felled by a high-powered rifle bullet fired from a rooming house near his hotel. But the prisoner has since told a tangled and sometimes contradictory story that makes him out to be a pawn in a larger plot to murder Dr. King.